Marxism or radical Fabianism?

An interview with Tony Collins on the precursors to the CPGB

Efraim Carlebach

On January 4, 2026, Platypus Affiliated Society member Efraim Carlebach interviewed Tony Collins about his book Raising the Red Flag: Marxism, Labourism, and the Roots of British Communism, 1884–1921.[1] *An edited transcript follows.*

Efraim Carlebach: Your book covers the socialist movement in Britain from the founding of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884 to the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).[2] What drew you to this history?

Tony Collins: I was initially looking at doing a book about the CPGB and the General Strike (1926). The more I read about the CPGB in the early 1920s, the more it seemed previous historians had missed the prehistory of the CPGB. No one had really discussed it since Walter Kendall's *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21* (1969) and Raymond Challinor's *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (1977).[3] There's been academic stuff: Martin Crick's *History of the Social-Democratic Federation* (1994) and Karen Hunt's *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question 1884–1911* (1996).[4] But there has been no attempt to connect that prehistory of the CPGB with the earlier history for 40–50 years. It wasn't enough to understand what was going on in the Third, or Communist, International (Comintern), which was the stance taken by Brian Pearce — the most notable example of a CPGB historian outside of the official histories. Much of what Pearce was talking about could also be seen in the precursor organizations of the CPGB. Pearce has a rather loose use of the word "sectarian," in which he follows the CPGB's own analysis of that prehistory. If you read James Klugmann's *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (1968), little attention is paid to anything before 1920.[5]

A debate rumbled on from the 1990s to the early 2000s in British labor history about the nature of the CPGB, between the so-called revisionists, who felt the CPGB had little to do with the Comintern's instructions and was essentially a domestic organization, and those who said the CPGB was a creature of the Comintern and had no roots in the British working class. The latter is related to Kendall's thesis that the British revolutionary movement was developing in a largely healthy manner until the intervention of the Comintern, whose money had an impact on the British groups that formed the CPGB, an alien body foisted on British revolutionaries.

We live in a period that has seen the collapse of the historical memory of revolutionary and working-class traditions. Much of what was taken for granted by Leftists in the 1960s and 70s is unknown, misunderstood, or has been overshadowed. I felt it was important to give an account of how Marxism developed in an organized form in Britain and how it was related to the British working class. I am keen to stress — against the anti-revisionist position in the debate on the CPGB — that what became the CPGB had deep roots in the British working class. It was as British as the Labour Party or the Independent Labour Party (ILP). That is important today, when it is difficult to see examples of class struggle and class consciousness we saw before and after World War I, or even in the 1970s and 80s. I hope the book will bring that tradition and the record of those militants to the attention of a new generation.

EC: Do you have a background on the Marxist Left? If so, how did you think about this history then?

TC: I got involved in politics as a teenager in the 70s. I was in the International Marxist Group (IMG) for five or six years and then I was involved in a split that joined the Spartacist tendency in the early 80s. I eventually dropped out of organized politics and became an academic about 20 years ago. I was diverted into the social history of sport. It took me 25 years to get back to where I started. Having said that, sport at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries was a reflection of class relations in Britain and to some extent it remains so.

EC: How did the IMG or the Spartacists discuss the pre-history of the CPGB? I'm aware of Joseph Seymour's *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* (1978)[6] as an intervention by the Spartacists into the fusion debates of the late 1970s that reassess the relationship between Kautsky and Lenin.

TC: In the 1970s there was an extensive debate that partly emerged from calls for unity on the far Left. From 1977 the IMG started to campaign to unite the far Left. Out of that came a discussion about the relationship of Lenin and the Bolsheviks to the Mensheviks and to some extent the Second International. Seymour's *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* was a response to that, as was Tony Cliff's biography of Lenin (1975–79).[7] There were also *The Origins of British Bolshevism* by Challinor, who was a member of the International Socialists (IS), which looked at the history of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and James Hinton's *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (1973) — Hinton was also in the IS.[8] There was a high level of interest in what happened in WWI, the relationship of the British Left to the Russian Revolution and previous revolutionary traditions in Britain. It was an important aspect of the IMG's fight for unity — questions about "Left-wing communism," parliamentarism in Britain and affiliation to the Labour Party, etc. The Spartacist tendency discussed Challinor's book at some point in the mid-80s. George Foster's article in *Spartacist* about the SLP informed some of what I have written in the book, and is worth reading, but it's not the whole story.[9] These questions were understood to be important by large sections of the far Left in the 70s.

EC: Was there a preference for the SLP, the group in Britain influenced by Daniel DeLeon, as opposed to the SDF/BSP, as an attempt to find an alternative path?

TC: The SLP consciously built an organization that was more programmatically coherent and disciplined than the BSP or other similar organizations. You can see that portrayal of the SLP in Challinor's book and Foster's article. I would differ from Challinor and Foster in that for me the SLP was not a Bolshevik Party or the British analogue of the Bolshevik Party, because, fundamentally, like the rest of the British Left pre-WWI, they were essentially propagandists who believed that the road to socialism was a question of education: the more you educated the working class about the realities of capitalism, the more they would revolt. Clearly that is different from the attitude of the Bolsheviks, who understood that consciousness comes through activity in the class struggle and that the role of the revolutionary party is to take politics to the working class, to campaign and to organize the working class in defence of its own interests. Writing the book, I discovered that was not only the perspective of the Bolsheviks; it was also the perspective of the Left-Menshevik Peter Petroff, a key player on the British Left, who was actually hostile to the Bolsheviks. He brought to the revolutionary Left in Britain that perspective of what a revolutionary party should do.

The SLP represented a revolutionary alternative, as did the DeLeonists in the U.S., on whom the British SLP modelled itself. It also represented the tendency in the Left wing of the pre-war socialist movement that focused on socialism as the creation of the working class, the working class governing society, which was found among the DeLeonists, revolutionary syndicalists in France, and in concepts such as soviets or the self-organization of the working class through mass strikes that you find in the Left wing of the Second International. That's the differentiating point between the SLP and the SDF/BSP tradition.

EC: We have been discussing the late New Left in the 1970s and 80s. Earlier you mentioned Brian Pearce, who left the Communist Party and became a Trotskyist during the early New Left immediately after 1956. His reconsideration of this history was motivated by a direct confrontation with Stalinism and the degeneration of Marxism. However, Pearce's essay "Marxism in Britain 1881–1920" hardly mentions the SLP at all.[10] He is more focused on the SDF/BSP trajectory. What do you make of that point of difference?

TC: Pearce was in the CPGB's History Group that set out in the 1950s to produce an official history of the CPGB. Events in Hungary and Khrushchev's secret speech intervened and Pearce moved Left — although he was always a Left-wing member of the CPGB. He then joined the Trotskyist group that became the Socialist Labour League. His conception of the origins of the CPGB was shaped by the CPGB History Group. They were aware that the CPGB took a lot from the BSP. I would agree, but from a different direction. There was little mention of the SLP or anybody else, and there was a sense that the continuity runs from the SDF in the early 1880s all the way to the CPGB in 1959. That analysis is narrow and is weakened by the overuse of "sectarian" to cover a lot of different things. Pearce's writing doesn't give a sense of the depth of class struggle that was taking place during the latter part of the period. Party history is not simply a history of programmatic disputes; it's the history of a party responding to meaningful events taking place in the class struggle.

EC: Whereas Pearce focused on problems arising from a process of Stalinization from 1924 onwards, you see that continuity as a "congenital weakness," if not stillbirth, and find the roots of that weakness going back to 1884 when the SDF was founded. What was the SDF's relationship to the socialist landscape of that time?

TC: The SDF emerged out of H. M. Hyndman's Democratic Federation, a broadly radical-liberal organization that transformed into the SDF in 1884 on the basis of a bowdlerized version of Marxism, which irritated Marx and Engels to no end, not least because Hyndman did not credit Marx for the economic analysis he used. Recently there has been work that tries to rehabilitate Hyndman to some extent, but Hyndman's vision of socialism was essentially a form of English nationalism. The SDF carried out several campaigns — against unemployment, for example — and attracted support because there was very little socialist activity in Britain at the time. The democratic revolutionary tradition of Chartism had died after 1848. The SDF was the first real attempt to re-establish any type of working-class socialist movement, so it attracted important people: Eleanor Marx, , the revolutionary syndicalist union leader Tom Mann, and people who went on to form the ILP. However, because it conceived of socialism as a

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The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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British impossibilism and the IWW

A debate without history

Adam Buick

THE "IMPOSSIBILIST REVOLT" in the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) at the turn of the last century led to the formation of two new political parties — the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain (SLP-GB) in 1903 and the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) in 1904. In the period up until the outbreak of the First World War, both parties were roughly the same size — each with no more than three hundred members. Yet labor historians have concentrated on the history and theories of the SLP-GB to the almost complete neglect of those of the SPGB, and worse, relegated the latter to a sneering footnote.

For example, writers of the Communist Party of Great Britain[1] (CPGB), A. L. Morton and G. Tate, claimed that, "In 1905, another split took place in the S.D.F., when part of the membership, this time mainly centred in London, formed the Socialist Party of Great Britain, a body so sectarian that it adjured both politics and *trade union action*."[2] They didn't even get the Party's founding date right and must have simply copied what G. D. H. Cole had written in his *Working Class Politics* without verifying its accuracy. Cole too had claimed the SPGB regarded trade-union action as futile.[3]

Walter Kendall, in his pioneering work on the origins of the CPGB, praised the SLP-GB paper *The Socialist* for providing "the highest level of Marxist literature in Great Britain," while dismissing the SPGB for being "unwilling to enter the political fray even to the extent of adopting a programme of 'palliatives.'"[4] He seemed unaware that the SLP-GB also had no such program and clearly not having read the articles on the materialist conception of history and on Marxian economics in the *Socialist Standard*, the SPGB's monthly paper.

The most recent addition to this literature, Tony Collins's *Raising the Red Flag*, accuses the SPGB of pursuing a "grim messianic parliamentary reformism" for wanting the working class to win political control to use as the "means of emancipation."[5] Such polemics may have their place in partisan political publications but not in works that aspire to be serious history. Here accuracy based on tracking down and examining available sources is what counts, however inconvenient for the political views of the historian. In Collins's case, it makes him a bad historian. The views of the SPGB were no less relevant to Marxism in this period — if only in terms of the numbers who held them — than those of the SLP-GB, John Maclean, and Sylvia Pankhurst, all of whom he examines in detail. It led to him missing the fact that five of the people mentioned in his book either became or had been members of the SPGB (Jack Fitzgerald, E. J. B. Allen, T. A. Jackson, Valentine McEntee, and George Hicks), which at least showed that the SPGB was a part of the Marxist scene at the time.[6]

No one who researched what the SPGB had actually said at the time could have concluded that the SPGB was anti-trade union or pro-reform.

The main reason the labor historians have neglected the SPGB is that, when the bulk of the SLP-GB joined the CPGB upon its formation in 1921, the SLP-GB had a place in research on the origins of that party. The SPGB had no such place. Not only that, it still existed and was critical of the politics of the labor historians interested in the origins of the CPGB. These historians included not just members and sympathizers of the CPGB but also Trotskyists and supporters of the Labour Party. They couldn't objectively study the political theory and history of the SPGB, as that would be to give some credibility to a political opponent. It could even be argued that if the SPGB suffered the fate of the rump SLP-GB — the members who refused to join the CPGB — and died out, labor historians would have treated it as one of the organizations that applied and spread Marxist ideas in Britain up to the First World War, alongside the SLP-GB and the SDF (or, as it became after the breakaways, the Social Democratic Party and then the British Socialist Party).

It is telling that the first article to treat the pre-1914 SPGB as worth studying came from outside Britain. In 1956, a historian from Japan, Chushichi Tsuzuki, published "The Origins of the S.L.P. and the S.P.G.B.,"[7] using the actual bound volumes of the SPGB's monthly journal as a primary source, which few have done since. Labor historians have no excuse for not doing this now since all the articles from the *Socialist Standard* before 1914 have been online for four years.[8]

Impossibilism

The word "impossibilist" was coined by Harry Quelch — a leader of the SDF and editor of its newspaper *Justice* — to describe those of its members who criticised its "possibilism," or the reformist pursuit of measures considered "possible" to achieve under capitalism. At the turn of the century, the view that this was what socialists should concentrate on was expressed within the international Social Democrat movement itself by Eduard Bernstein and other Marxist "revisionists." Both the SLP-GB and the SPGB accepted the term "impossibilist" but preferred to describe themselves as "revolutionary" or "anti-revisionist" socialists.

The impossibilist criticism of the existing non-socialist unions was not based on any general theory that capitalism had reached a new stage where it could no longer concede wage increases or improvements in working conditions. Rather, it was that these trade unions did not seek to abolish capitalism. This was also the mainstream Social Democrat position, as expressed, for instance, by Kautsky, who argued that "it is absolutely necessary that the Trade-Unions be dominated by the spirit of Socialism. . . . no working-class organisation, no working-class movement can completely accomplish its aims unless it is permeated by the spirit of Socialism."[9]

Similarly, the rejection of campaigning for social reforms — a key, even defining, feature of "impossibilism" — was not linked to any theory that capitalism had reached a stage where reforms were no longer possible. It was based, rather, on pragmatic political consequences: for a socialist party that risked becoming absorbed in the pursuit of reforms rather than socialism, and for the working class, which would be encouraged to assume that capitalism could be reformed to benefit it.

It could be said, however, that this position assumed the achievement of certain foundational reforms of benefit to the working class; for instance, a wide enough franchise, basic factory laws, and free public education. Nevertheless, the impossibilists, both SPGB and SLP-GB, did not regard these reforms as amounting to a change in the way the capitalist economic system worked, but a change only in its political superstructure — they were even measures that facilitated capitalism's economic functioning.

The impossibilist position on reforms differs from that of Marx, who assumed that a movement rooted in trade unions and trade-union demands would develop more or less spontaneously into an explicit movement for socialism, and from that of Rosa Luxemburg, who argued that the struggle for reforms was "the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal — the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour."[10] It might be concluded that history has not borne out either of these positions.

Sword and shield

The SLP-GB was formed after the expulsion of some impossibilists at the 1903 SDF Conference, and at the SPGB 1904 Conference. Both parties were similar in that they had been influenced by the position of the Socialist Labor Party of America (SLP-A) and its main theoretician, Daniel De Leon. The SLP-A had dropped its minimum program of immediate demands in 1896. The SLP-GB initially had such a program, but dropped it in 1906. The SPGB never had one.

The SLP-A stood for socialism as the common ownership of the means and instruments of wealth production by society as a whole, to be administered by an "industrial government" based on industries, not geographical districts. It held that to achieve socialism, the working class would have to organize both politically and economically. It was particularly opposed to the existing trade unions which it called "pure and simple" unions because they accepted capitalism and the wages system. It denounced them as obstacles to the growth of socialist consciousness and their leaders as "labor fakirs" and "labor lieutenants of the capitalist class." Instead, it supported the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance (STLA) as a revolutionary socialist union. Its newspaper *The Weekly People*, along with the pamphlets of Marx and other socialist writers it published, were widely read by the dissidents within the SDF.

De Leon held that both political and economic action were needed to end capitalism and bring in socialism. He had a degree in law and liked to use the legal metaphor of the "sword" and the "shield."[11] At the time that both parties were founded, De Leon regarded political action as the sword and economic action as the shield.[12] In other words, that political action was more important.

Despite their organizational separation, the SLP-GB and the SPGB pursued identical forms of activity, both having drawn from De Leon's conception of socialist politics. They published monthly journals (*The Socialist* and the *Socialist Standard* respectively), held street meetings, gave indoor lectures, ran education classes and debated opponents — all with the aim of persuading their fellow workers to become socialists and to organize into a political party whose objective was the establishment of a society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production and distribution by society as a whole.

Both parties defined socialism in the same way and both advocated that the working class should use the ballot box to win control of the state. So why wasn't there a single impossibilist party? In theory, there could have been, but personal accusations and recriminations proved to be serious obstacles. One difference which initially seemed minor but which was to grow into a major disagreement, was over what De Leon called the "burning question" of trade unionism.

Political action

When they were founded, both the SLP-GB and SPGB sought to model themselves on the SLP-A and, reflecting the American party's position at the time, both prioritized political action to dispossess the capitalist class and establish socialism.

An article in the June 1905 issue of *The Socialist*, declared that "the Socialist Labour Party, which, when voted into political power shall declare the land and tools of production the common property of the people." Clause 6 declared, "That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organise consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic."[14] Both parties were keen to enter the field of political action by putting up candidates. However, they only had enough resources to contest local elections, the SLP-GB more frequently than the SPGB.

> (1) Is the fact plain to you, that under the present economic system there are of necessity two antagonistic classes, and consequently, an irrepressible class struggle? (2) Is the further fact plain to you that at every stage of this struggle all the political powers have heretofore been held and used by the capitalist class to establish, maintain and extend its economic domination over the wage-working class? (3) Is it, therefore, plain to you that the economic emancipation of labour must be achieved by the working people themselves, politically united into a party of their own class against all the political parties of capitalism?[13]

The declaration of principles of the SPGB that applicants were required to endorse also set out that "the economic emancipation" of the working class was to be achieved by them taking political action to conquer "the legislative machinery" and using it to make "the land and tools of production the common property of the people."

Trade unions

Both parties also wanted to emulate the SLP-A by having a socialist trade union to endorse. In its report to its 1905 Conference the SLP-GB's executive committee stated that it "will have to seriously consider whether the time is ripe for the formation of a Socialist Union based on the lines of the STLA and ALU, which have performed such yeoman service to the American Labour. That such an organisation will have to be formed sooner or later is inevitable. The only question is to decide whether our political movement is sufficiently strong to enter upon the task of forming it."[15] The Party's constitution and rules, amended at the same conference, laid down that, "No official of a trade union or any other organisation supporting or affiliated with any other political party shall be eligible for membership of the party." One of the duties of the Party's executive committee was "the formation of Socialist Trade Unions."[16] The former was interpreted as meaning that no member of the SLP-GB should be an official (even an unpaid branch officer or committee member) of a "pure and simple" trade union. The formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in America in June 1905 presented the Party with a "socialist trade union" to endorse and promote.

Meanwhile, the SPGB, at its Inaugural Meeting in June 1904, instructed its executive committee to convene a special meeting of members as soon as possible "to discuss and determine the attitude of the Party towards trade unions," even though the outcome might seem to have been pre-empted by the passage on trade unionism in their June 1905 manifesto:

> The basis of the action of the trade unions must be a clear recognition of the position of the workers under capitalism, and the class struggle necessarily arising therefrom: in other words, they must adopt the Socialist position, if they are going to justify their existence at all. Does this mean that the existing trade unions are to be smashed? That will depend upon the unions themselves. All actions of the unions in support of capitalism or tending to side-track the workers from the only path that can lead to their emancipation, should be strongly opposed; but on the other hand, trade unions being a necessity under capitalism, any action on their part upon sound lines should be heartily supported.[17]

It soon became clear, however, that there was a division of opinion on the matter. One motion at the special meeting proposed that the SPGB "recommends its members to join the unions in their respective trades in order that by the spread of socialist enlightenment the members of the working class organised in Trade Unions may be enabled to prosecute the class struggle with the efficiency which results alone from clearly defined class-conscious action."[18] Another proposed that members be "advised to form Socialist groups inside their unions for the purpose of common counsel and joint action to counteract any abandonment of working-class interests and to educate their fellow members in the principles of the class-struggle."[19] A third proposed that members "in Trade Unions shall simply use their position therein to reiterate the Socialist position, but shall in no case accept any official position where their actions would be controlled by the Trade Unions instead of by Socialist convictions."[20]

There was in fact no prospect of the SPGB adopting an anti-trade-union position as many of its members were active trade unionists and office-holders, particularly in the Operative Bricklayers Society.

The matter wasn't resolved till 1906, by which time the discussion had been enlarged to involve whether the IWW was a revolutionary workers' union. The finally agreed SPGB position was summarized in a 1907 resolution:

> the S P G.B. holds that Trade Unionism is a necessity under capitalism, to prevent the workers being continuously driven to sell their labour power below its value. . . . the S.P.G.B. holds that Trade Unionism is necessary for the establishment of Socialism. . . . the S.P.G.B. holds that the form of organisation must have a class basis as first principle and the trade sub-division as the chief detail of organisation; other sub-divisions, either geographical or economic, to be arranged as circumstances demand. . . . the S.P.G.B. urges forward the propaganda of the economic position laid down in conjunction with its political propaganda both inside and outside the present unions with the object of establishing the Socialist Trade Union required for this work.[21]

In other words, the SPGB accepted that the workers would have to be organized economically as well as politically for socialism at some point. In the meantime socialists could — and even should — join the existing unions, if only to try to ensure that they and their fellow workers were not paid less than the value of their labor-power; SPGB members were allowed to hold office within them. This contrasted with the SLP-GB position of uncompromising opposition to the existing trade unions (though it accepted that its members could join them if they had to) and support for the formation of revolutionary trade unions to rival them, a policy later known as "dual unionism."

The SLP-GB regarded the SPGB's practice of joining and working within the existing unions as akin to socialists working within reformist political parties, denouncing it as "boring from within" and advancing this as a reason why there could be no unity between the two impossibilist parties.[22]

If the labor historians had bothered to consult the original material they would have discovered that, far from opposing trade unionism, at the time the SPGB was being accused of failing to oppose it.

The IWW

At the end of June 1905, various groups met in Chicago to establish the Industrial Workers of the World. Among those present was Daniel De Leon. Its preamble began:

> The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together on the political, as well as on the industrial field, and take and hold that which they produce by their labor through an economic organization of the working class, without affiliation with any political party.[23]

De Leon was so impressed that he finally reversed his earlier opinion that it was political action that was the sword and economic action the shield.[24] He now said economic action — to "take and hold" the means of production by means of a "general lock-out" of the capitalist class — was the sword, and political action relegated to winning control of the state to ensure it could not obstruct the prosecution of economic action.

The formation of the IWW changed the nature of the debate between the two impossibilist parties in Britain. It was no longer about when a hypothetical "socialist trade union" should be formed or how it should be organized, but whether one had now been formed and whether it should be supported. It also changed the vocabulary used. Up till then, in Britain, the word "trade union" was synonymous with "economic organization" and didn't imply organization by craft, or "trade." Thus, both the SLP-GB and the SPGB had talked about the need for a "socialist trade union." But the IWW was set up on the basis of organizing workers by industry and not by "trade"; its preamble denounced "trade unions" as divisive. From this point on, the SLP-GB embraced "industrial unionism," what De Leon called "socialist industrial unionism." The SPGB stayed with the broader term "economic organization."

In Britain the formation of the IWW was met with enthusiasm by the SLP-GB and by some members of the SPGB. With the support of the SLP-GB, the "Advocates of Industrial Unionism" was set up to campaign for an organization like the IWW to be formed in Britain. Through this and on its own, the SLP-GB set about vigorously campaigning for industrial unionism.

The SPGB was not impressed by the IWW and objected that — just like the "trade" unions it opposed — the IWW was based on the principle of organizing workers who were not explicitly socialist. So, despite its commitment to waging the class struggle, it could not be regarded as socialist. The IWW was in effect a "pure and simple" *industrial* (as opposed to *trade*) union.[25] Some members and sympathisers of the SLP-GB were not impressed either and made the same point.[26]

The SPGB held that organizing workers by industry was also divisive.[27] But, above all, the SPGB was opposed to the proposal to try to "take and hold" the means of production without first wresting control of the state from capitalist hands through political action. Without doing so would be disastrous.[28] The SPGB insisted that, to take over the means of production, the working class should first, as William Morris once put it, "get at the butt end of the machine gun and the rifle"[29] by winning political control via the ballot box which would give them control of the armed forces.

The SLP-GB interpreted the SPGB's rejection of industrial unionism as a rejection of any economic organization by the working class and so accused the SPGB of being merely a "pure and simple" socialist party, as it was put in a 1908 debate in Manchester. The SPGB representative replied that the Party accepted the necessity of economic organization, but not in the form of separate industrial unions: workers were already socially organized in that they collectively carried out all the productive and administrative labor that kept society running, and would continue to do so after political action had withdrawn state support for capitalist ownership and taken the armed forces out of capitalist control: "The workers are already organised socially, and when they get a majority in Parliament, the changed conditions will already have brought about the necessary economic machinery to adapt itself to circumstances."[30]

Slippery slope

In making economic action more important than political action, the SLP-GB was on a slippery slope. In the first instance, it meant concentrating just as much on campaigning for industrial unionism as on campaigning for socialism. Then it meant campaigning more for industrial unionism than for socialism. Finally, it meant arguing that campaigning for industrial unionism was campaigning for socialism on the grounds that, if the workers were organized in one big industrial union, this would more or less automatically reflect itself on the political field.[31]

In March 1906, E. J. B. Allen, a founding member of the SPGB who had defected to the SLP-GB, addressed a meeting of the Battersea Branch of the Operative Bricklayers Society in London at their invitation. Several branch members that were also in the SPGB were present. One of them asked Allen to explain the "contradiction" in the IWW's preamble, its claim that it favored both industrial and political action (as it still then did) while also declaring that it would "take and hold" the means of production "without affiliation with any political party." Allen described his reply as follows: "I said I failed to see a contradiction, the actual 'taking and holding' would be without affiliation, as the political movement would have had to have done its work by destroying capitalist political power *before* they could 'take and hold.'"[32]

Allen also said that "the I.W.W. demanded the political unity of the workers as being the only possible way for effective action, and considered economic unity would bring that about." This point was stated even more explicitly in an SLP-GB leaflet on "Industrial Unionism" reprinted in the same issue of *The Socialist*: "Industrial Unionism, based as it is on the fact of the class struggle, promotes the Political Unity of Labour by achieving Labour's Industrial Unity."[33]

By 1908 the SLP-GB was arguing that:

> The Industrial Unions will constitute a body of men and women at once intensely practical and uncompromisingly revolutionary. . . . And when it forms its own political party and moves into the political field,

> as it surely will, in that act superseding or absorbing the Socialist Labour Party and all other socialist or labour parties . . . When, in the fullness of its strength, it is able through its political ambassadors to demand the surrender of the capitalist class, it will be in a position to enforce its demands by its organised might, and, in place of the strikes of former days, institute the General Lock-Out of the capitalist class.[34]

This reversed the earlier position put by E. J. B. Allen at the Battersea meeting in March 1906, that the industrial union would "take and hold" the means of production *after* winning political control. Now the argument was that it would do this and *then* send elected members of the legislature as "ambassadors" to take political control and demand the "surrender" of the capitalist class.

In the meantime, Allen too had moved on. Along with some other SLP-GB members he concluded that political action was unnecessary and that all that was required to overthrow capitalism was industrial action to "take and hold" the means of production. By 1907, the IWW itself had deleted any reference to political action and, by so doing, came out as a quasi-syndicalist organization.

Eventually, the SLP-GB argued that even non-revolutionary industrial unionism paved the way for socialism:

> the mistake of the S.P.G.B. is that it does not recognise that the desired Labour Unity can only flow from a mechanism reflecting that of a system of modern co-operative production — the I.W.W. It is necessary for the workers to hold their embryonic industrially administrative councils ere capitalism goes down as it was for the rising capitalist class to hold its embryonic political assemblies, parliaments, and committees before the downfall of feudalism.[35]

This echoed the view expressed by James Connolly — a founder member of the SLP-GB and a member of the SLP-A — in a 1908 talk given in New York on "The Future of Labour," in which he argued that, just as the capitalist class had built up its economic strength before it was able to win political control, so the working class had to do the same by first building up its economic strength by organizing in industrial unions. Hence his view that "the fight for the conquest of the political state is not the battle, it is only the echo of the battle," and the conclusion that "*the conquest of political power by the working class waits upon the conquest of economic power*."[36] In publishing the talk, the editor of *The Socialist* at the time had written diplomatically that "we may not necessarily agree right away with all its details."[37] Three years later the SLP-GB had come to agree with Connolly's view.

By then, *The Socialist* was edited by George Harvey, a miner from Durham and a member of the Plebs' League involved in the 1909 Ruskin College student revolt. He came to the conclusion that the rule banning SLP-GB members from becoming an official of a non-socialist trade union was a hindrance to furthering the cause of "socialist industrial unionism," arguing the case for this in a letter for the March 1912 issue of *The Socialist*. The rule was subsequently repealed, and in 1913 Harvey was elected an official of the Durham Miners Association, as checkweighman at a colliery in Durham. Things had moved a full circle for the SLP-GB: from denouncing the SPGB for "boring from within" the existing trade unions, to ultimately pursuing that very course.

Meanwhile the SPGB stuck to the original "impossibilist" view that socialist activity should be aimed at directly encouraging the working class to win political control in order to end capitalism rather than seeking "possible" improvements within the system. This will have been one reason why it did not join in founding the CPGB, surviving throughout the rest of the 20th century and to this day — providing a non-Leninist interpretation of Marxism and an embarrassment to Left-wing labour historians. **|P**

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[1] Founded in 1920 and dissolved in 1991.

[2] A. L. Morton and George Tate, *The British Labour Movement, 1770-1920: A History* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956), 218n [emphasis added].

[3] G. D. H. Cole, *British Working Class Politics, 1832–1914* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1941), 177.

[4] Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21: The Origins of British Communism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 21.

[5] Tony Collins, *Raising the Red Flag: Marxism, Labourism, and the Roots of British Communism, 1884–1921* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2024), 31. See also Efraim Carlebach, "Marxism or radical Fabianism? An interview with Tony Collins on the precursors to the CPGB," in this issue of the *Platypus Review*.

[6] For my full review see "Bolshevising the Red Flag," *Socialist Standard* 1451 (July 2025), <https://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/2020s/2025/no-1451-july-2025/book-reviews-collins-mitchell-joyce/>.

[7] Chushichi Tsuzuki, "The 'Impossibilist Revolt' in Britain: The Origins of the S.L.P. and the S.P.G.B.," *International Review of Social History* 1, no. 3 (December 1956): 377–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859000000729>.

[8] The *Socialist Standard* archive is available at <https://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/standard-archives/>.

[9] Significantly, a translation of this was published in a 1906 issue of the *Socialist Standard*: "Karl Kautsky on Socialism and Trade Unionism," *Socialist Standard* 26 (November 1906), <https://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1900s/1906/no-26-november-1906/karl-kautsky-on-socialism-and-trade-unionism/>.

[10] Rosa Luxemburg, "Introduction," in *Reform or Revolution* (1900, 1908), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/intro.htm>.

[11] See Melanie Morris, "8.5 The Sword and Shield Doctrine," in *Business Law I – Interactive* (Branchburg: Raritan Valley Community College, 2024), <https://rvcc.pressbooks.pub/businesslaw131interactive/chapter/8-5-the-sword-and-shield-doctrine/>: "The sword and shield doctrine is a legal principle that pertains to the use of a contract's terms as both a sword to enforce the contract and a shield to defend against claims under the contract."

[12] See Daniel De Leon, "What Means This Strike?" (February 11, 1898), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/deleon/works/1898/980211.htm>: "The trade organization is impotent if built and conducted upon the impotent lines of ignorance and corruption. The trade organization is NOT impotent if built and conducted upon the lines of knowledge and honesty; if it understands the issue and steps into the arena fully equipped, not with the shield of the trade union only, but also with the sword of the Socialist ballot."

[13] *The Socialist* (August 1906).

[14] Socialist Party of Great Britain, "Our Object and Declaration of Principles" (1904), <https://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/our-object-and-declaration-principles/>.

[15] *The Socialist* (June 1905). ALU stands for the American Labor Union.

[16] *The Socialist* (August 1906).

[17] Socialist Party of Great Britain, *Manifesto of the Socialist Party of Great Britain* (1905), <https://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/pamphlet/manifesto-socialist-party-great-britain-june-12th-1905/>.

[18] Gilbert McClatchie [Gilmac], "Notes on Party History: The Trade Union Question," *Socialist Standard* 599 (July 1954), <https://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1954/1950s/no-599-july-1954/notes-party-history-trade-union-question/>.

[19] Ibid.

[Endnotes 20–37 available online]

"Marxism or radical Fabianism?," continued from page 2

Hyndman, trying to denigrate the SDF, and arguing the ILP was fulfilling the *Communist Manifesto*'s (1848) programmatic statement that communists have no interest separate from the working class and do not seek to form separate parties. Of course, Beer's publication of Marx and Engels was selective.[16] Rothstein came from a different direction, from the Left. He said there's the Chartist tradition, different from Labourism. Rothstein was not necessarily in favour of joining the Labour Party at that point; he was suspicious of the ILP's non-Marxist politics.

EC: What is your view of Kautsky's contribution to the 1908 debate on the Labour Party's place in the Second International, "Sects or Class Parties"?[17]

TC: Kautsky wants to have his cake and eat it: "you can have your organization but you also have to be in the Labour Party." Radek's critique of that deserves wider circulation. He says one problem with the orientation towards the Labour Party is that you have to adopt and campaign for its program. That puts revolutionaries in the position of saying something they don't fully agree to. That is an important question throughout the history of Marxist movements. There's diplomacy involved in joining organizations. That means we can't raise our program, or we have to wait. That is still relevant today, particularly on the Trotskyist Left.

As we've discussed, historical circumstances in Britain for the formation of the socialist parties were the inverse of those in Germany. But that doesn't have any bearing on what those organizations should have said programmatically. That is something the Comintern begins to realize, particularly at the Second Congress in 1920.

EC: I first came across Kautsky's essay in 2016–17, when it was being circulated by people advocating supporting the Democratic Socialists of America and Bernie Sanders's campaign, as an argument that the sectarianism that had dogged the Left since the 1970s must be left behind. There was an attempt which really started around 2010, to reappraise Kautsky on the Left, sometimes associated with Mike Macnair and the *Weekly Worker*.[18] That ended up being used as arguments for joining the Labour Party to support Jeremy Corbyn or the Democrats to support Bernie Sanders. How did you understand that development at the time?

TC: There has been a failure to acknowledge that "Sects or Class Parties" was written as part of a debate about the electoral tactics of British Marxists and that Kautsky's side, the Center and Right wing of the Second International, argued in favor of standing down for the Liberals. You can ask, what's wrong with standing down for the Liberals if that's a tactical question? But my point — the fundamental point forgotten by the rehabilitation of Kautsky — is that we are looking at two different conceptions of what socialism is. That wasn't clear to revolutionaries in 1908, but it became clear through the experience of 1917.

Kautsky's position was that of parliamentary socialism. It could be supported by strikes and other types of struggles but socialism will come through a majority in parliament, which will enact socialist measures. The revolutionary tradition, which was confused and did not necessarily understand itself as being in opposition to Kautsky, had the position that socialism would come from the working class itself and that parliament was a block to socialism. That division within the Second International — and out of it — was developing between those who saw socialism as something that comes on behalf of the working class through parliament and those who saw socialism as something organized by the working class itself. Lenin's *State and Revolution* shows that he understood the lesson that has been ignored or is unknown today. The Kautsky road to socialism was fundamentally different from the road that revolutionaries have seen since the Paris Commune and Marx's *Civil War in France* (1871): "The working class cannot simply lay hold of the state machinery."[19] That was demonstrated not just in the 1905 Russian Revolution, but in all major revolutionary centers. The working class creates its own organizations that vie for state power, the organs through which it will govern; parliament is not the organ through which the working class will rule but is rather a block to it, partly because it depends on the separation of powers. The rehabilitation of Kautsky is not simply a question of coming up with subtler tactics than the "sectarianism" of the traditional Left — it's a different conception of how socialism operates. If you read Macnair's *Revolutionary Strategy* (2009), it's clear that he doesn't believe soviets are organs of working-class power. That is central to the debate but it hasn't been discussed. The debate over Kautskyanism has been on the terrain of tactics rather than the more fundamental issues.

EC: Your book came out in a different context, after the Corbyn project had collapsed. It was received by groups on the Left that have been inspired by Macnair's *Revolutionary Strategy*, which might describe themselves as "partyist."[20] You were interviewed by *Cosmonaut*, and your book was reviewed positively in *Prometheus*.[21] I think they wanted to see your account of this history as a guide to their conception of action in the present. This tendency has now been funnelled into Corbyn's new project Your Party and ongoing experiments to build a new party somehow to the Left of Labour, but it's unclear what sort of goal or ideology they have. How do you understand that reception of your book?

TC: It's a testament to the interest in what the nature of the party to take the working class and the oppressed forward should be. In the book I describe a conception of the party largely by implication, because it's a work of history. Although it obviously has relevance, it's not a contemporary political document. I'm not sure the book's conception of the party is the same as the "partyist" tendency on the Marxist Left, given the importance of Kautsky for them. For example, when the BSP discussed joining the Labour Party in 1913, the line of the Center of the BSP, which saw itself as part of the classical Marxist tradition of Kautsky, was to join the Labour Party. During WWI, the Center opposed splitting with the pro-war element until it left by itself in 1916. In counter-position to Lenin's policy, during and after the War, they sought to unify all the elements of the socialist movement that were united before the War. That is different from the perspective of Lenin, who argued that the events of August 1914 drew a sharp line between revolutionaries and social patriots, along with those who refused to break with the social patriots. That led to the formation of the Comintern. I will be interested to know the response of the "partyist" tendency within Marxism to those arguments. The partyist argument is that there should be the creation of the party of the whole class, led by Marxists — a kind of recreation of the SPD in Germany in the pre-war period.

EC: You said that there has been a collapse of historical memory between the New Left and the present. How do you see that problem of continuity and discontinuity within Marxism, from the 1880s to the present? Someone like Brian Pearce in the late 1950s would have viewed Stalinism as the liquidation of historical memory in the party. Nonetheless, Pearce claimed that the small group of Trotskyists he was speaking to sat in direct organizational descent from the CPGB, the BSP, and the SDF. In the 1970s when you were having these debates, did you think that there had been a breakdown in historical memory prior to you that you had to leap over, back to Lenin and Kautsky? Was there organizational continuity of some kind? How do you understand that today? If there is some kind of continuity, even though it may be weak, we can try to find the thread, pick it up, and run with it again — but if there's a deeper break, it seems to pose more fundamental questions about our relationship to the period of classical Marxism.

TC: In the 1970s and 80s there was a sense that you were part of the historical movement. The continuity was strong, partly for practical reasons. For example, I went to a meeting where the speaker was Harry McShane, who worked with John Maclean during WWI. Andrew Rothstein, the son of Theodore Rothstein and a leader of the CPGB, was still alive. You would still meet people who were involved in the 1926 General Strike, including my grandfather. Whichever strand you claimed to be a part of — the sense that you were part of that tradition was strong. The IMG used its version of Lenin to justify its socialist unity campaign in the late 1970. Tony Cliff looked to Lenin to justify the foundation of the Socialist Workers Party. Joseph Seymour's *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*, in counter-position to those two positions, was a successful attempt to resurrect an idea of Lenin's thought in development from classical Social Democracy towards 1917 and the Comintern.

However, we have to admit that the 1980s saw historic defeats for the working class in Britain. Then there was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. On the back of that the bourgeoisie has engaged in a ferocious ideological and physical campaign against Marxism to destroy and undermine ideas of a revolutionary alternative to capitalism. It is difficult, because of the ideological dominance of capital, to conceive of an alternative, which wasn't the case 40–50 years ago. The strength of the trade unions in Britain allowed you to envisage that working-class people could run the country, whereas today those practical examples don't exist. Blairism is the classic example of an attempt to replace even Labourite social democracy with a form of liberalism — to go back to the Lib-Lab days — and wipe out the organizational independence of the working class. That's also true on a global scale. The situation requires attempts to find arenas of struggle where victories can be won and to restore those revolutionary traditions to contemporary consciousness. That's a hard task, but the recovery of those traditions, in theory and practice, is not beyond our capabilities. What's more, it's essential.

EC: There's a question of how one responds to defeat. In classic Trotskyist terms there was a collapse of historical memory because the Left called defeats victories. Is it possible for the Left today to confront the nature of the defeat?

TC: A lot of analysis of the present and the recent past by revolutionary Marxist organizations has an idealist quality: it's simply a question of better argument. There's an element of truth to that, but it's because the revolutionary Left has lost any purchase that it had within the working class. Leadership within the working class and having an impact on the working class are about developing authority, which comes from more than simply having the best argument. It's not enough to be the smartest person in the room. That is one of the historic problems that has faced ostensible Trotskyism over the past 50 years.

Thinking about Brian Pearce and the liquidation of historical memory, it's obvious when we look at the Soviet Union in the 1930s. However, that level of conscious liquidation and rewriting of history is not the problem that we've been faced with recently. We are faced with a conglomeration of different tendencies claiming the Marxist tradition with different programs, attempting to take the working class forward. To give those programs authenticity, they are often based on a reading of history, which may or may not be accurate. The purpose of books like *Raising the Red Flag* is to give a fuller account of the past than has existed so far in order that we may draw some lessons from it. The Kautsky debate is an interesting example. Those who want to rehabilitate Kautsky rely on a view of the past that is incorrect. For example, Lars T. Lih has claimed that Lenin was simply following Kautsky's positions. That lends historical authenticity and authority to practical politics in the present day. Lih's analysis and the concomitant politics are mistaken. But those are debates that the Left needs to have. Ultimately, they will be decided in practical terms by those who can lead the working class to victories.

EC: You said that this revival of Kautsky in the 2010s posed things at the level of tactics or strategy and therefore missed out the question of goals. Are questions of Marxist strategy on the table today, in terms of forming a political party, or is it no longer the issue today that it may have once been; whether in the 1970s, the 1950s, or the 1920s?

TC: The questions are still on the table, but they're posed in a different way. Marxism is a guide to action. The extent to which one can implement a strategy is a different question. To be a revolutionary in the current era means understanding the past, but also a conception of what needs to be done now and in the immediate future. That raises the question, what is our conception of socialism? What is our ultimate goal and how is it linked to our strategy now? That's the fundamental question that has been missed from the debate on Kautsky over the past 10 years or so. Kautsky was proposing a different conception of socialism from that of Lenin and the Bolsheviks and the revolutionary tradition that identifies with 1917.

EC: Looking at Your Party, it seems various Trotskyist groups including the Spartacist League have thrown themselves in headfirst. I'm not sure what that bodes for their future but clearly these questions will continue to be raised about the fate of Trotskyist groups after a breakdown of historical memory.

TC: It looks like the same thing is going to happen in the Socialist Workers Party (UK). Their conference is next week. Big things are brewing. There is a re-composition of the Left, which has been heightened by the Your Party developments. It's a potentially important breakthrough in that it presents an alternative to the Labour Party, but I'm not convinced that anybody in the leadership sees it that way. I'm not convinced that Corbyn does. His strategy is to get back into the Labour Party as soon as possible. Former Labour MP Zarah Sultana — perhaps. But it is difficult after the Your Party conference to see what's happening. Everything is submerged. **|P**

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[1] (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

[2] The Democratic Federation was founded by H. M. Hyndman in 1881. It became the Social Democratic Federation in 1884 and participated in the founding of the Second International in 1889. Members including William Morris and Eleanor Marx split in 1885 to form the Socialist League, which soon turned to anarchism, causing some to eventually rejoin the SDF. Influenced by Daniel DeLeon, a group in Scotland split in 1903 to form the Socialist Labour Party. Another "impossibilist" group in London formed the Socialist Party of Great Britain in 1904. The SDF became the Social Democratic Party in 1908 and then the British Socialist Party in 1911 following a merger with Left-wing splits from the Independent Labour Party. The latter, founded in 1893 by Keir Hardie, formed the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, which went on to become the Labour Party in 1906. In 1916, Hyndman's pro-war group walked out of the BSP after losing control to its Left wing. The BSP was central to the negotiations to form a Communist Party, eventually doing so with elements from the SLP and others in 1920. Sylvia Pankhurst's Communist Party and the Scottish Communist Labour Party agreed to unity at a re-founding conference of the CPGB in 1921.

[3] Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–21: The Origins of British Communism*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

[4] Martin Crick, *The History of the Social-Democratic Federation* (Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 1994); Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question 1884–1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[5] James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, vol. 1, *Formation and Early Years, 1919–1924* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968).

[6] Joseph Seymour, *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* (1978), <https://www.bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/LeninVanguard/LVP%200.htm>.

[7] Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, vol. 1, *Building the Party (1893–1914)* (1975); vol. 2, *All Power to the Soviets* (1914–1917) (1976); vol. 3, *The Revolution Besieged* (1917–1923) (1978); vol. 4, *The Bolsheviks and World Revolution* (1979), all published by Pluto Press in London.

[8] James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973).

[9] George Foster, "The Far Left: 1900–1920: British Communism Aborted: A Review: *The Origins of British Bolshevism*," *Spartacist* 36–37 (Winter 1985–86): 54–64, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/spartacist-us/1981-1987/0036-0037_Winter_1985-86%28b%29.pdf>.

[10] Brian Pearce, "Marxism in Britain 1881–1920," *Labour Review* 4, no. 3 (October–November 1959): 90–98, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pearce/1959/10/marxism.htm>.

[11] Karl Marx to H. M. Hyndman (December 8, 1880), in H. M. Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life* (London: Macmillan, 1911).

[12] Ernest Belfort Bax, "Our German Fabian Convert; or, Socialism According to Bernstein," *Justice* (November 7, 1896), <http://marxists.org/archive/bax/1896/bernstein/bernstein1.htm>.

[13] Karl Marx, "England and Revolution" (December 31, 1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/12/england-revolution.htm>.

[14] Theodore Rothstein, in *Justice* (October 21, 1899).

[Endnotes 15–21 available online]

better way of organizing society to make sure none of England's people suffered, it found itself at odds with the rising working-class militancy in the late 1880s. In the London dockers' strike (1889), two of its members were in the leadership, John Burns and Tom Mann, but the organization itself was hostile to the strike and felt that it was a waste of time. Its general line towards strikes was that the time, energy, and revenue lost in strikes could be better used electing socialists to Parliament. The SDF was clearly on the Right of the spectrum in the Second International, and was marked by Hyndman's English nationalism, which it didn't shake off until WWI blew the organization apart.

EC: It is often argued that the SDF was unable to build a mass socialist party in Britain, remaining a sect, because it disdained trade-union activity. There's a pre-history to this. Chartism had a vexed relationship to trade unionism, and the First International arguably broke down because the English trade unionists walked out after Marx's address on the Paris Commune. There was an antinomy of political and social action. The trade unions then gave political support to the Liberal Party. The Democratic Federation was founded as a radical discontent with Gladstone's Liberals, which it saw as becoming imperialist and "neo-conservative," especially with the Irish Coercion Act (1881). Later, as the SDF became more influenced by Marxism, there was a critique of the limits of trade-union consciousness. Theodore Rothstein, for example, presented that kind of argument. How would you steel-man the SDF's critique of the limits of trade-unionism in its attempt to establish socialist politics in Britain?

TC: The SDF was not unequivocally opposed to trade-unionism. It had members in trade unions. However, its vision of socialism and how it is reached was a kind of radical Fabianism. They objected not to the existence of trade unions, but to strikes, working-class self-activity, the working-class taking its destiny into its own hands. That's why the tension points in the SDF's history concern the dockers' strike in 1889 and the strike wave in 1893. There is a long discussion about the relationship of politics and trade unions. The unionism of the 1860s and 70s was the skilled working class organizing craft unions that were protective of their privileges. That is part of the basis for the traditional analysis of the rise of the labor aristocracy in Britain, which is correct. The SDF's critique, however, is different. The leadership of the SDF saw socialism as something done for the workers not by the workers. A gross example is when Hyndman says something like "we want socialism in this country to stop the terrible events" — i.e., revolutions — "that have taken place in Europe from happening here in Britain." That's the difference. It's a form of Fabianism. They recognized the problems British capitalism has caused and therefore, in order to protect their conception of England, thought it was necessary to build a united society in which the working class is sufficiently cared for. They didn't desire a revolution that would put the working class in command of society. That dividing line became increasingly clear in the 1900s, when the SLP split off and there is the rise of syndicalism.

EC: In a letter to Hyndman, Marx, discussed whether a revolution in Britain is necessary or possible.[11] There was a question for Marx and Engels about whether a revolution was necessary for the working class to come to power in Britain at that time because of the preponderance of the working class and the nature of the political constitution, compared to the police-state monarchies of Europe. That goes on to become a vexed issue in the revisionist dispute, which you have alluded to with this idea of "radical Fabianism." How do you understand that problem?

TC: Marx and Engels discuss the possibility that in Britain and the U.S., because of the lack or weakness of the military-bureaucratic state that develops in Europe in response to workers' uprisings, a peaceful revolution would take place. Still, their conception of the revolution is that the working class takes power and rules in its own name. Their discussion is about how that will take place. Is the working class such an overwhelmingly large proportion of the society that, when it achieves full class consciousness, it could rise up and take over in a peaceful manner through sheer numbers? Engels started to rethink that later as the British state developed and became militaristic. After the strike waves of the 1890s, it became clear, through the use of military force at ports like Liverpool and Hull, that the British state was willing to use the military. That argument about how the working class comes to power is not how the SDF viewed the situation or its goals — hence the reliance throughout its history on parliamentary means and its distrust of any others.

EC: Conversely, precisely in that period of increased industrial unrest and state repression, Fabianism arose and the German Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein, who was working in Britain, began to think that we don't need a revolution, things can progress gradually through the state. This spawns the revisionist dispute, which presages the whole split in the Second International. Although you describe the SDF as radical Fabianism, the first critiques of Bernstein's revisionism arise within the SDF, in articles by Belfort Bax calling him a "German Fabian."[12] Perhaps these problems are not so peculiarly British as they might seem but represent an early manifestation of something that becomes a crisis of international socialism, and so cannot be understood within the confines of a "British problem."

TC: It's interesting that Bernstein spent a significant amount of his political career in London and was close to the Fabians. We can surmise that he was influenced by Fabian arguments. Belfort Bax is hostile to his arguments because of the rivalry with the Fabians. The rise of revisionism in the 1890s is a product of the growing influence of the Social Democratic movement, obviously in Germany, but also the working-class movement across Europe. In the 1890s it appears to be going from strength to strength and therefore the working class can become electorally dominant. It's a contradictory response to the growing self-confidence of the working class.

Bax was to the Left of Hyndman on many issues, but he was also a fanatical opponent of women's rights. The SDF was a contradictory organization containing lots of ideas that at the time would have been considered backwards. The SDF is part of the international debate that fully emerges in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) about revisionism. Despite its leadership's anti-Germanism, the SDF saw its role in the Second International as important and promoted itself as being internationalist. Despite its poor record supporting strikes, it attracted several generations of people who wanted to be revolutionaries, international socialists. It was seen as the Marxist organization, the party of the Second International.

EC: Britain was the global hegemon in the era of "Pax Britannica." Marx writes in 1848, "A revolution of the economic conditions of any country of the European Continent or even of the whole Continent, is but a storm in a glass of water, unless England actively participates in it."[13] There seems to be this paradox that in the country where capitalism is most advanced, with the largest working class, where it would in a sense be most important to take power, the party of the Second International is the weakest. There's an inability to form a mass party on the German model, yet a world revolution would have to pass through Britain. How did that paradox affect the SDF's sense of its role in the International and the International's view of the SDF?

TC: The SDF had a contradictory attitude to the International. It was an active participant, but it was suspicious of the leadership, particularly the Germans. Hyndman's Germanophobia carried on through the 1890s and to the outbreak of war. He didn't like that the SPD was the dominant party. That flowed from his English nationalism and the idea of the Anglo-Saxons as the leaders of the world. Outside of its Left wing, I'm not sure that the SDF had any conception of world revolution. It viewed membership of the Second International as something that was important but supplementary to its role in Britain. The idea that the International could suggest policy would have been anathema to it. That was how the Second International worked anyhow, until the early 1900s when the question of a unified socialist party in each country came up. Outside of its Left wing — this is linked to the issue of imperialism — it paid lip-service to the idea of the international proletariat, but it never engaged in discussions about world revolution or the things that became commonplace in the Comintern. It viewed revolutions abroad as national questions to be dealt with by the working classes and socialist parties in those countries. Despite its proclaimed Marxism, it still operated within well-defined national boundaries.

EC: How did that play out regarding the British Empire? Hyndman, for example, advocated "home rule" for India and Ireland. There was a continuation of a liberal idea that the Empire in the 19th century was prohibiting the progressive development of these nations and that they needed more freedom, within the structure of the British Empire, to develop. At the same time, the SDF opposed the Boer War, opposed Britain gaining new colonies or oppressing small nations. Even if they only had a conception of their party coming to power in Britain, that would have put them at the head of the Empire. Would they have then advocated the dissolution of the Empire, from India to Australia, or would they have seen it becoming a socialist federation of some kind?

TC: Hyndman and the SDF were critical of the British Empire. Their texts on Ireland and India bear re-reading. However, that wasn't unusual in liberal and radical circles among the upper and middle classes. There was a strong tradition of questioning imperialism within British liberalism; it doesn't mean they were anti-imperialist in a modern sense. The classic example is E. D. Morel, the great liberal campaigner against Belgian atrocities in the Congo and for European imperialism to leave Africa, who was also deeply racist when it came to the possibility of black soldiers and workers coming to Britain — that is generally forgotten about today. The SDF proposed self-government for Ireland and India, which can be interpreted many ways. For example, Lloyd George wanted self-government in Ireland in 1919–20, i.e., formal independence with Britain still controlling foreign and military policy. Had the SDF come to power, it would have described its policy as a socialist commonwealth of nations. The Empire would still exist, perhaps more informally, and certainly without the more egregious forms of repression, violence, and exploitation. It's a mistake to view the SDF's critique of the Empire as anti-imperialist in a way that Marxists today or in the 20th century would have understood it.

If you read the newspaper *Justice* on the Boer War, the critique they made of British imperial ambition in southern Africa, the diamond and gold mines, is clear, but they thought it was a war forced on the British by the Jews. The antisemitism of the SDF leadership and *Justice* was strongly criticized by James Connolly. In the 1900s, Germanophobia became strong among the SDF leadership, and one of its main campaigns was for a stronger British navy to meet the threat of Germany, so it fed into the imperial rivalries that would lead to WWI.

EC: Another critic of Hyndman's antisemitism in the Boer War, Theodore Rothstein, had a laconic comment that there was no risk of a mass antisemitic movement in Britain, as there was on the continent, because *Justice* had such a small circulation.[14] This raises the relationship between mass socialist politics and mass antisemitic politics — essentially, "the socialism of fools." How do you understand that problem? Are there any lessons there for the present?

TC: A significant section of the SDF, particularly the Left, called out the antisemitism of the leadership. It was contradictory because at the same time in the early 1900s that the SDF was publicly blaming the South African war on Jewish interests, it experienced an influx of Jewish members, particularly moving from Eastern Europe to the East End of London. That was because of its status as Britain's Marxist party in the Second International. Rothstein was correct, *Justice* had little influence among any section of British society. There was a rise in overtly antisemitic organizations, particularly in London, in the early 1900s, with Jews being attacked, and the Aliens Act of 1905. Antisemitism was not part of the SDF's program but it continued to exist in the SDF all the way up to 1914. There are letters in *Justice* in 1913–14 complaining about Jewish speculators and Jewish finance, but it was never the dominant ideology and it was opposed by the Left and the Center whenever it arose. The Center of the SDF at this time was led by Jewish members with origins in the Russian Empire: Theodore Rothstein, Zelda Kahan, and Joe Feinberg.

EC: Another well-rehearsed explanation for the failure of British socialists to build a mass party is that they botched the relationship to the Independent Labour Party, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), and the Labour Party. That continued with the CPGB and the question of affiliating to the Labour Party in the 1920s. How do you understand the Labour Party debate in this period?

TC: It began with the relationship of the SDF to the ILP, which was founded in 1893. Much of the ILP leadership spent some time in the SDF: Ramsay MacDonald, John Bruce Glasier, Tom Mann, Eleanor Marx, and Edward Aveling, who was part of the drafting committee that wrote the ILP program. The SDF lost out to the ILP primarily because of its attitude to strikes and workers' activity. The ILP owed much of its popularity to the fact that it was seen as the party of the strikes and the new unionism, but the ILP was tightly controlled and consciously led by Keir Hardie and then by Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden. It distinguished itself from the SDF by its non-conformist liberalism and a very "traditional British outlook" that socialism was an ethical issue, even a form of Christianity, whereas the SDF, whatever its faults, was known as a militantly atheistic organization.

As the ILP grew in the 1890s, the leadership of the SDF realized it was losing out and began a series of courtship manoeuvres, which incurred the wrath of its Left wing, particularly those based in Scotland who would go on to form the SLP in 1903. The ILP had close relationships with the trade-union bureaucracy, which led to the ILP initiating the LRC in 1900, as a block between the ILP, the Fabian Society, the SDF and leaders of some of the smaller trade unions.

There had long been a proposal that there should be an "independent" labor party opposed to the Liberals. The dominant tradition in labor-movement politics of that period was "Lib-Labism," whereby trade-union leaders would become Liberal MPs but sit in Parliament to defend trade-union interests. However, in the late 1890s, after the upsurge in trade unionism, there was a backlash, and the employers tried to fight back against union power. The Liberals were no longer seen by the various trade unions as a reliable ally. That led to discussions about whether the Liberal Party was the vehicle to defend the interests of the trade unions. The LRC was formed to encourage labor representation in Parliament. It was an electoral bloc, not a party. It didn't have any local organizations. It was led by the leaders of the ILP in collaboration with trade-union leaders. After the first year, the SDF dropped out, because it appeared to be a waste of time, and, more importantly, the Left wing of the SDF was militantly opposed to alliances with the ILP, which it saw as a variety of liberalism. In order to head off pressure on its Left, the SDF threw it a bone and left the LRC. However, they couldn't see what was about to happen. A railway strike broke out in Wales, and the employers took the union to court for damages, which would have killed off the unions. The unions appealed and, in what became known as the Taff Vale judgement, the courts upheld the right of employers to sue unions that went on strike, which made the trade-union leaders worried. They realized that they could no longer rely on the Liberals that had allowed that to go through. The LRC became inundated with trade unions wanting to join and it suddenly acquired massive importance in British politics, so much so that by 1906 it won 29 seats in Parliament, making it a significant force.

EC: Max Beer, the London correspondent of the SPD's newspaper *Vorwärts*, argued that this development represented the independent party of labor that Marx and Engels had worked for. This led to a debate around the decision of the Second International to allow the Labour Party to affiliate in 1908: whether it should be admitted as a trade-union bloc or as a party, and what attitude the Second International should take towards the Labour Party's refusal to avow the class struggle and socialism as its goal. There is an interesting exchange of articles on this by Kautsky, Radek, and Rothstein. It comes down to the question, what is independence? Why is there a need for working-class socialist political independence?

TC: That is the nub. When the LRC is formed, one of the first things Ramsay MacDonald does is approach the Liberal Party for electoral alliances, though it wasn't known about until later. So, the LRC, which changes its name to the Labour Party after 1906, was still tied to the Liberal Party in a more convenient arrangement for the ILP and the trade unions, as well as the Liberal Party because they think it will allow the LRC to split the significant working-class Conservative vote. In 1906, 24 of the 29 Labour MPs were elected as part of stand-down agreements with the Liberals in various constituencies. While there was formal organizational separation, there's still a political alliance with the Liberals. This increasingly becomes a point of acrimonious debate within the Left of the British labor movement.

That is partially behind the 1908 debate about whether the Labour Party should be accepted into the Second International. Kautsky argues it should be accepted because it is a socialist party, even though it hasn't said this in so many words. Lenin says it's not, because it is still pursuing alliances with Liberals. However, trade unions, whose leaders are bourgeois politicians, were allowed to affiliate, so the Labour Party should be allowed to affiliate, because it represents an organizational break if not a political break, and therefore the first step towards full independence of the working class from the bourgeoisie. That is a constant in Lenin's thought up to the debates in 1920 about the Labour Party.

That becomes a tactical debate on how politics in Britain should be conducted. As the debate was taking place in the Second International, the ILP agreed to stand down its candidate for a by-election in Newcastle in favor of the Liberal candidate, and encouraged its supporters to vote for the Liberals. The SDF stood in the election and won more votes than the margin of victory of the Conservative candidate over the Liberal. That was a tremendous controversy. The Left said, "The ILP is standing down for the Liberals — where is the political advance there?" For the ILP leadership, the SDF had allowed a Tory in. The ILP position was accepted by Kautsky and the leadership of the Second International. There's an interesting article by Otto Bauer, the Austrian Social-Democrat, where he supports Kautsky and the ILP, in a classic case of lesser-evilism, "supporting the least bad candidate," which would be the Liberal rather than the Conservative. What might appear as a marginal difference in words between Lenin and Kautsky in the debate over Labour Party affiliation is a huge practical difference. There was growing disillusionment among Left-wing and working-class militants about the ILP and the project of the Labour Party because between 1906 and 1914 it was a voting bloc for the Liberals. It didn't project any form of political independence from the Liberals. That led to a steady stream of splits from the ILP to its Left, which eventually led to the creation of the British Socialist Party.

EC: For socialists to have political independence, they must disavow lesser-evilism.

TC: Yes, because independence is a question of political program. It goes back to Marx and Engels and the way they understood working-class revolution. It's about having independent working-class politics. It's not enough to be organizationally separate. It requires an alternative vision of the society that you are struggling for, which is about the governance of the working class for and by the working class.

EC: The debate about whether the SDF should apply to join the Labour Party involves some traditional Marxist arguments about the peculiar historical development of Britain, including the bourgeois revolution taking place a century before France and trade unions developing before the socialist party, whereas in Germany it was the other way around. Earlier you said that you think the "labor aristocracy" thesis is totally correct. Do you also accept those theses about the historical conditions that made it difficult to develop a Marxist party in Britain?

TC: There's some truth in it, but that perspective — as well as the theory of the labor aristocracy — is missing the subjective factor. It ignores the fact that the SDF lost out to the ILP in the 1890s because the ILP became the party of working-class struggle and strikes. Counterfactual history can be wishful thinking, but it's worth speculating about alternative scenarios to understand how the world we live in emerged. If the SDF had thrown itself into support of the London dockers' strike in 1889, and allowed Tom Mann and John Burns to become leaders not just of the strike but of the SDF, if the SDF had identified itself with and sought to assist where possible to lead those strikes, the balance of forces for Marxism in Britain would have been different. It still would have suffered from the problems of a long-established labor aristocracy and the backward political culture of Britain due to its early bourgeois revolution. But the SDF did itself no favors by its abstention from the manifestations of the class struggle, and that was one of the sources of the weakness of the British Marxist movement. There is a strain of thought within British Marxist historians and British historiography generally that gives too much weight to objective factors and does not look at the interplay of those objective factors — whether the labor aristocracy or the early bourgeois revolution — and the subjective factor, the relationships of the parties and the way the class struggle developed in the 1890s and 1900s.

EC: One thing that mediates the objective and subjective factors is historical consciousness. A traditional Marxist way of understanding the role of the party is as a repository of historical consciousness. The Labour Party debate led to debates about the legacy of Chartism between Beer and Rothstein.[15] Rothstein tried to map Chartism onto contemporary debates and vice versa. Had there been a breakdown in the historical memory of Chartism? What significance did that attempted recovery have on debates about political independence and mediating subjective and objective, as well as social and political action?

TC: The legacy of Chartism as a mass democratic revolutionary movement, with insurrectionist tendencies, had been destroyed by the 1860s. The defeat after 1848 meant that the revolutionary vanguard of Chartism either left politics or became Radical Liberals. Engels pointed out that by the 1860s, the six points of the Charter were being adapted and adopted by the Liberals. George Harney goes off to America and doesn't come back to England for 30 years, and Ernest Jones essentially becomes a liberal politician. One could say that the only people in Britain who continued that revolutionary tradition were Marx and Engels. That's not just a regression of historical consciousness; it's also due to the changing nature of the British economy. The vanguard layers of the working class in Chartism were primarily skilled artisans, and the strategic importance of that layer of the working class was disappearing by the 1850s because of the growth of heavy industry and expansion into capital goods. It's not too different from today, as the historical consciousness of the working class has regressed.

In the Rothstein-Beer debate, they both used historical examples to justify the position of the SDF. Beer was a journalist articulating the line of the leadership of the Second International, that Marxists should be in the Labour Party because it will be the mass party of the British working class. The 1906 general election transformed the understanding of the Labour Party. Beer published in the *Socialist Review*, the ILP's theoretical journal, previously unpublished letters from Marx and Engels attacking

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